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ABSTRACT

This newsletter examines the continuous progress (CP) curriculum, the primary characteristic of which is flexible pacing for the student. The newsletter notes some of the practical concerns limiting implementation of CP curricula, and how some schools have overcome them. It then discusses four issues that schools must address to employ a continuous progress plan: (1) scope and sequence; (2) instructional materials; (3) management system; and (4) teachers as advisors. The costs of implementing such a program are also considered. Next, the newsletter discusses the advantages of such a plan, including making students accountable for their learning, allowing students credit for what they have learned, avoiding the negative consequences of tracking, and making teachers think more critically about what they are teaching. The implications of CP for gifted students are explored, and several programs succeeding with at-risk students are described. The newsletter concludes by noting the parallels between CP and the push for accountability, and the factors needed in place before implementing such a program. Contains 14 references. (HTH)

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SYNTHESIS

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Continuous Progress/Ungraded Schooling: One Way to Individualize Learning

ED 371 908

Consider these dilemmas faced by teachers:

- Dick has fallen behind his classmates. Should he be retained?
- Jane devours her work and is at the top of the class. How do you keep her from being bored?
- Joey reads better than students in your low reading group, yet not as well as those in your high group. Which group do you put him in?
- Your students are functioning at a wide range of levels. If you teach to the middle of the class, you miss both the top and the bottom ends.
- Half of your students receive special services—Chapter 1, learning disabled or speech. How do you organize classroom instruction around all the interruptions?

One solution to such dilemmas is the adoption of a continuous progress (CP) curriculum where the coursework is laid out in a sequential manner. Using this curriculum, also known as ungraded schooling, each student's abilities and needs are assessed for placement. Students are then grouped by ability, regardless of age, and progress at their own rate, some faster and some slower, yet all closely monitored.

The principles behind a CP curriculum—individualization of instruction and learning—are widely accepted on a theoretical basis, but implementation of CP curricula has been limited by practical concerns, ones that some schools have overcome.

Hood River Valley High School in Hood River, Oregon, breaks typical courses—World History, for example—into units and allows students to move at their own speed through and between the courses. Most courses taught have 10 units, although some have as few as three. Student progress is monitored using a computerized recordkeeping system.

> Traditional textbooks are not written with individualization of learning in mind.

Andrews Middle School, Andrews, Texas, administers a pretest to all entering students in its mathematics program and places them according to ability. The curriculum is broken down into units, and after completing a unit, the student's progress is monitored using a posttest. If the student has mastered the unit, he/she can go on; if the unit is not mastered, he/she continues the same unit with different materials.

Chalmette High School, Chalmette, Louisiana, divides each subject into essential learning, exploratory learning, and in-depth opportunities. Activities are based on student learning styles, with credit earned based on objectives mastered

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compared to all the objectives for the course. Essential learning must be completed to earn credit but can be spread over more than one school year.

John M. Jenkins, director of the University of Florida laboratory school in Gainesville and a CP advocate, says that to employ a continuous progress plan, each school must address four issues:

Scope and Sequence. Schools establish performance objectives by which a student's status/progress can be measured. Two approaches are used to organize the curriculum. In one, traditional subject-matter divisions (e.g., social studies into history, sociology, economics, etc.) are established for each course. In the other, goals for the entire subject area are assigned and a continuum of objectives is established.

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Instructional Materials. Some schools use teacher-developed materials, while others employ commercially developed materials appropriate to individual progress. Traditional textbooks, Jenkins notes, are not written with individualization of learning in mind.

Management System. Fear of disorder or chaos is the primary reason that teachers and administrators shun CP. Jenkins' suggestions include furnishing materials of interest to students and geared to their learning styles; maintaining records either on computer or manually; knowing where each student is every day; helping students use their time wisely by creating student plan forms; conducting frequent individual student conferences; assigning students to the most appropriate learning environment for a task; organizing teaching and learning spaces so students do not get in each other's way; and securing the assistance of teacher aides and volunteers to help distribute materials and equipment.

Teachers as Advisors. In most CP schools, a system has been established whereby each professional staff member advises 15 to 25 students. The advisor knows, or comes to know, a student better than any other professional in the school and is able to help map a learning plan that will be most beneficial for that student.

A student who has mastered half the objectives will be led to master the rest, not made to repeat the entire course.

Jenkins cites numerous advantages of a CP curriculum. First, students are responsible for demonstrating mastery of objectives, making them accountable for learning. Second, students receive credit for what they learn. A student who has mastered half the objectives will be led to master the rest, not made to repeat the entire course. Third, CP avoids putting students in accelerated, average, and remedial tracks—with documented negative social consequences—in favor of teaching students in smaller groups that are constantly rearranged as students move through them. Fourth, teachers think more critically about what they are teaching by developing teacher-made tests. Fifth, gifted and talented students are challenged through acceleration, enrichment, and in-depth investigation. Sixth, a school's gifted and talented program can be open to all because mastery counts, not scores on "intelligence" tests. Finally, scheduling becomes easier, and small schools can offer a richer program.

A school's gifted and talented program can be open to all because mastery counts, not scores on "intelligence" tests.

Other research supports Jenkins' assertion that CP programs meet the needs of gifted students. In "Flexible Pacing for Able Learners," Neil Daniel and June Cox examined 32 CP programs in 18 states. They determined that a flexible pacing option allows a higher degree of learning than having all students move in lock step. "Once grade labels are removed from achievement levels and disassociated from chronological age, students of all abilities appear to thrive."

A flexible pacing option allows a higher degree of learning than having all students move in lock step.

Daniel and Cox indicate that implementing a CP curriculum requires backing from administrators and the support of teachers who must make a special commitment to allow students to progress as they master skills. A CP curriculum will require teachers to spend more time planning and may require some to take additional courses to be prepared to offer more advanced content. Implementation of CP also demands a recordkeeping system, ideally computerized, to track student progress.

Although it may seem obvious that the gifted would be well-served by a CP program, researchers have also concluded that CP programs have been among the most effective in serving at-risk students. Johns Hopkins University researchers, Robert E. Slavin and Nancy A. Madden, report that successful programs found to work for students at-risk of academic failure were dominated by those that employed a CP curriculum.

In "Effective Classroom Programs for Students At Risk," Slavin and Madden examined programs designed to increase reading or mathematics achievement in grades 1 through 6, implemented in regular classrooms, and applicable to at-risk students. They began with a brief review of studies critical of traditional pull-out programs. Some researchers have found that the more time students spent in pull-out programs, the less they learned. Problems that Slavin and Madden identified with the practice included differences between the way the classroom and the special teachers

approached the student and the time lost in transition from the regular classroom to the pull-out program.

Slavin and Madden's concerns about pull-out remediation programs were shared by Oak Park (Illinois) Elementary District 97, which changed its curriculum to one of continuous progress. Superintendent Ernest H. Mueller described the problem in a paper entitled "The Oak Park Plan: The Fourth R (Rescheduling)." Mueller said that although high achievers in the district performed well, low-ability students did not: "The problem with special-area programs such as LD resource rooms, remedial reading, speech and others has been that the removal from the regular classrooms (pull-outs) and the fix-up/return process worked for very few.... The indications were that the remedial programs were a self-perpetuating condition conducted in an atmosphere not transferable to the regular classroom."

CP programs have been among the most effective in serving at-risk students.

Oak Park's response was to divide the school day into two parts. For three hours of each day, the special teachers, e.g., learning disabled and reading teachers, etc., were put in regular classrooms. All students were spread among classes with the "regular" classroom teachers and the "special" teachers. During this three-hour period, reading, mathematics and language arts were taught to classes of about 15 students at no more than two grade levels. During the remaining two and one-half hours, other subjects were taught to "normal size" classes of about 25 students, while special teachers provided direct service to students and consulted with other teachers.

This approach, Mueller maintains, reflected renewed faith in the classroom teacher. Smaller class sizes increased the teacher's opportunity for success in the classroom. "With class sizes reduced, classroom teachers may accept the responsibility to instruct all children in their classes, and they might also develop the belief that they can make a difference. If these conditions materialize, student outcomes should be dramatically affected."

Mueller noted that it was too early to draw conclusions from the Oak Park plan. Academic gains would have to be measured over several years, and staff development, which includes CP strategies, such as use of tests to properly place students and measure achievement, needs to be provided. However, the program received high marks from teachers and from learning disabled students, who said that they liked going to class with the other students. Absenteeism dropped from 4.2 to 3.3 percent in the first year of the program.

Mueller also identified several requisite factors for the Fourth "R" program: adequate classroom space to accommodate the smaller classes; teachers who are dually certified for special areas and classroom work; and acceptance of the concept by principals, teachers, parents, and the school board.

The more time students spent in pull-out programs, the less they learned.

Among the most detailed forays into continuous progress education, reported by Gail V. Barrington occurred in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. From 1982 to 1987, Project ABC (Advancement Based on Competency) installed and tested continuous progress principles in three Calgary high schools. Each high school undertook a different approach to breaking the tie between time and credit. After five years, researchers concluded that achievement levels for students in Project ABC schools were as high as for those in other schools. Researchers determined that the curriculum of the province had been adhered to as well as it had been in "traditional schools."

Project ABC had its roots in the frustrations that Calgary administrators felt in dealing with underachievers and gifted students in a setting where credit given was based on time spent in a course. Project ABC endeavored to determine whether schools could break the tie between time and credit—allowing some students to move more quickly and others to take more time to cover material. To make the change, the schools adopted a continuous progress program. The study defined continuous progress to include a learning rate compatible with ability, flexible timetabling, and advancement based on demonstrated competency.

Barrington warned that switching to the CP plan involves extra costs. Individualization of programs required more instructional materials, computers, photocopiers, and paper. Her analysis also found increased demands for clerical and paraprofessional support, staff training, and staff time for initial curriculum development.

Among Barrington's other findings were the following: the program is best implemented by teachers who share the project philosophy; implementation requires total staff

commitment; and a flexible plant design makes implementation easier. Barrington concludes: "Personalized instruction and continuous progress are viable educational alternatives and should no longer be considered experimental."

"With class sizes reduced, classroom teachers... might also develop the belief that they can make a difference."

Programs that Slavin and Madden identified as effective with at-risk students fell into categories of continuous progress, individualized instruction and cooperative learning. The following common features were identified in CP programs: (1) Students proceed through a well-specified hierarchy of skills, being tested at each level to determine whether they are ready to move on. (2) Detailed records of student progress are kept and are used for ability grouping, remediation and other decisions. (3) Instruction is given by teachers primarily to groups of students at the same instructional level. Students are constantly grouped and regrouped, often across grade levels.

Successful CP programs for at-risk students, identified by Slavin and Madden, include the following:

Distar—This University of Oregon program provides teachers with scripts to use in teaching reading and math and instructing students using specific methods. Students are taught in small groups, assessed frequently, and regrouped accordingly. Studies revealed that students improved their performance on language and math computation tests, but not on the higher-order skills of reading comprehension or mathematical problem solving. Follow-up studies of a New York City elementary school found that 55 percent of Distar students graduated from high school, compared to 34 percent for a control group.

PEGASUS—This program, originally developed in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, organizes the reading program into 17 levels from kindergarten through grade 8. Students progress at their own rates, mastering a continuum of skills at each level. Studies show increased reading comprehension and vocabulary growth, but no study was conducted examining the program's effectiveness with students from low socioeconomic status groups (a rough measure of risk).

ECRI—The Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction, developed in Utah, employs detailed instructions for teachers and frequent assessment of student progress. Instruction is done in small groups and students work on materials at their own rates. Word attack skills are emphasized. Evaluations in suburban Cincinnati; Englewood, Ohio; and rural Louisiana show progress with low achievers.

"Personalized instruction and continuous progress are viable educational alternatives and should no longer be considered experimental."

Project INSTRUCT—Developed and evaluated in Lincoln, Nebraska, this classic CP program groups students by skill levels, then moves them through a hierarchy of skills at their own rates. A 1975 evaluation found small positive effects on reading and math achievement.

GEMS—Goal-Based Educational Management System, developed in Utah, has reading students in kindergarten through grade 12 moving through 200 skill levels. Each unit has a pre- and a post-test. Each student must achieve an 80 percent score before moving on to the next unit. A computerized management system tracks student progress. Vocabulary progress was identified, but no attempt was made to measure effectiveness with disadvantaged students.

"Our norm-referenced standards for grades are contradictory to the learning levels, diversity and potential students bring to our school settings."

Early Childhood Preventative Curriculum—This Miami, Florida, program is targeted toward high-risk first graders. After each student's strengths and weaknesses are identified, he/she receives instruction in small groups and proceeds at his/her own rate.

One of the lessons from this review of CP is that there is no right or wrong way to go about it. Continuous progress is a concept; adoption of a CP program requires tailoring it to individual circumstances. As the University of Florida's Jenkins put it, "Continuous progress education is not controlled by a monolithic body of pedagogical dogma complete with its own guru."

Accountability is one area that is acquiring its own set of gurus, many from outside the educational community. Jenkins suggested that accountability and continuous progress may be more alike than

different. He finds parallels between CP and the push for accountability because in both:

- —Standards and objectives, including the mastery level, are determined in advance.
- —Instruction is provided to assist students in reaching the objectives or standards.
- —Tests are used to determine a student's success in reaching the objectives or standards.
- —Additional instruction is provided students who have failed to meet the objectives or standards.

The research points to a number of common factors to be considered before moving to a CP curriculum. Teachers, principals and parents need to believe in the system. Additional materials must be provided. Ideally, additional space will make the transition easier. A system of tracking student progress must be put into place. Time must be found for inservice training. In addition, some studies have pointed to the need for more clerical and paraprofessional staff.

This is an imposing set of factors, but there are equally compelling reasons to consider the change. Floyd E. McDowell, a Delaware school principal, put it bluntly in *The School Administrator*, January 1986: "Our norm-referenced standards for grades are contradictory to the learning levels, diversity and potential students bring to our school settings."

McDowell also charges: "The highest failure rate is in the first grade. How can anyone defend failing even one child day-after-day, month-after-month, if the principles of learning are applied properly?"

This issue of Synthesis was written by Michael D. Klemens, Springfield, Illinois.

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Synthesis articles review educational research on important practices regarding academic achievement. The articles are designed to stimulate thought and discussion about best practices among school teachers, administrators and others interested in educational excellence. Duplication of this newsletter is permissible. Opinions expressed in Synthesis do not necessarily represent the policy of the Illinois State Board of Education.

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